

How Legalizing Prostitution Has Failed

When Germany legalized prostitution just over a decade ago, politicians hoped that it would create better conditions and more autonomy for sex workers. It hasn't worked out that way, though. Exploitation and human trafficking remain significant problems. By SPIEGEL Staff

Sânandrei is a poor village in Romania with run-down houses and muddy paths. Some 80 percent of its younger residents are unemployed, and a family can count itself lucky if it owns a garden to grow potatoes and vegetables.

Alina is standing in front of her parents' house, one of the oldest in Sânandrei, wearing fur boots and jeans. She talks about why she wanted to get away from home four years ago, just after she had turned 22. She talks about her father, who drank and beat his wife, and sometimes abused his daughter, too. Alina had no job and no money.

Through a friend's new boyfriend, she heard about the possibilities available in Germany. She learned that a prostitute could easily earn €900 (\$1,170) a month there.

Alina began thinking about the idea. Anything seemed better than Sânandrei. "I thought I'd have my own room, a bathroom and not too many customers," she says. In the summer of 2009, she and her friend got into the boyfriend's car and drove through Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic until they reached the German capital -- not the trendy Mitte neighborhood in the heart of the city, but near Schönefeld airport, where the name of the establishment alone said something about the owner: Airport Muschis ("Airport Pussies"). The brothel specialized in flat-rate sex. For €100 (\$129), a customer could have sex for as long and as often as he wanted.

It all went very quickly, says Alina. There were other Romanians there who knew the man who had brought them there. She was told to hand over her clothes and was given revealing lingerie to wear instead. Only a few hours after her arrival, she was expected to greet her first customers. She says that when she wasn't nice enough to the clients, the Romanians reduced her wages.

The Berlin customers paid their fee at the entrance. Many took drugs to improve sexual performance and could last all night. A line often formed outside Alina's room. She says that she eventually stopped counting how many men got into her bed. "I blocked it out," she says. "There were so many, every day."

Locked Up

Alina says that she and the other women were required to pay the pimps €800 a week. She shared a bed in a sleeping room with three other women. There was no other furniture. All she saw of Germany was the Esso gas station around the corner, where she was allowed to go to buy cigarettes and snacks, but only in the company of a guard. The rest of the time, says Alina, she was kept locked up in the club.

Prosecutors learned that the women in the club had to offer vaginal, oral and anal sex, and serve several men at the same time in so-called gangbang sessions. The men didn't always use condoms. "I was not allowed to say no to anything," says Alina. During menstruation, she would insert sponges into her vagina so that the customers wouldn't notice.

She says that she was hardly ever beaten, nor were the other women. "They said that they knew enough people in Romania who knew where our families lived. That was enough," says Alina. When she occasionally called her mother on her mobile phone, she would lie and tell her how nice it was in Germany. A pimp once paid Alina €600, and she managed to send the money to her family.

Alina's story is not unusual in Germany. Aid organizations and experts estimate that there are up to 200,000 working prostitutes in the country. According to various studies, including one by the European Network for HIV/STI Prevention and Health Promotion among Migrant Sex Workers (TAMPEP), 65 to 80 percent of the girls and women come from abroad. Most are from Romania and Bulgaria.

The police can do little for women like Alina. The pimps were prepared for raids, says Alina, and they used to boast that they knew police officers. "They knew when a raid was about to happen," says Alina, which is why she never dared to confide in a police officer.

The pimps told the girls exactly what to tell the police. They should say that they were surfing the web back home in Bulgaria or Romania and discovered that it was possible to make good money by working in a German brothel. Then, they had simply bought themselves a bus ticket and turned up at the club one day, entirely on their own.

Web of Lies

It seems likely that every law enforcement officer who works in a red-light environment hears this same web of lies over and over again. The purpose of the fiction is to cover up all indications of human trafficking, in which women are brought to Germany and exploited there. It becomes a statement that transforms women like Alina into autonomous prostitutes, businesswomen who have chosen their profession freely and to whom Germany now wishes to offer good working conditions in the sex sector of the service industry.

That's the 'respectable whore' image politicians seem in thrall of: free to do as they like, covered under the social insurance system, doing work they enjoy and holding an account at the local savings bank. Social scientists have a name for them: "migrant sex workers," ambitious service providers who are taking advantage of opportunities they now enjoy in an increasingly unified Europe.

In 2001, German parliament, the Bundestag, with the votes of the Social Democratic Party/Green Party governing coalition in power at the time, passed a prostitution law intended to improve working conditions for prostitutes. Under the new law, women could sue for their wages and contribute to health, unemployment and pension insurance programs. The goal of the legislation was to make prostitution a profession like that of a bank teller or dental assistant, accepted instead of ostracized.

The female propagandists of the autonomous sex trade were very pleased with themselves when the law was passed. Then Family Minister Christine Bergmann (SPD) was seen raising a glass of champagne with Kerstin Müller, Green Party parliamentary floor leader at the time, next to Berlin brothel operator Felicitas Weigmann, now Felicitas Schirow. They were three women toasting the fact that men in Germany could now go to brothels without any scruples.

Today many police officers, women's organizations and politicians familiar with prostitution are convinced that the well-meaning law is in fact little more than a subsidy program for pimps and makes the market more attractive to human traffickers.

Strengthening the Rights of Women When the prostitution law was enacted, the German civil code was also amended. The phrase "promotion of prostitution," a criminal offence, was replaced with "exploitation of prostitutes." Procurement is a punishable offence when it is

"exploitative" or "dirigiste." Police and public prosecutors are frustrated, because these elements of an offence are very difficult to prove. A pimp can be considered exploitative, for example, if he collects more than half of a prostitute's earnings, which is rarely possible to prove. In 2000, 151 people were convicted of procurement, while in 2011 it was only 32.

The aim of the law's initiators was in fact to strengthen the rights of the women, and not those of the pimps. They had hoped that brothel operators would finally take advantage of the opportunity to "provide good working conditions without being subject to prosecution," as an appraisal of the law for the Federal Ministry for Families reads.

Before the new law, prostitution itself was not punished, but it was considered immoral. The authorities tolerated brothels, euphemistically referring to them as "commercial room rental." Today, just over 11 years after prostitution was upgraded under the 2001 law, there are between 3,000 and 3,500 red-light establishments, according to estimates by the industry association Erotik Gewerbe Deutschland (UEGD). The Ver.di public services union estimates that prostitution accounts for about €14.5 billion in annual revenues.

There are an estimated 500 brothels in Berlin, 70 in the smaller northwestern city of Osnabrück and 270 in the small southwestern state of Saarland, on the French border. Many Frenchmen frequent brothels in Saarland. Berlin's Sauna Club Artemis, located near the airport, attracts many customers from Great Britain and Italy.

Travel agencies offer tours to German brothels lasting up to eight days. The outings are "legal" and "safe," writes one provider on its homepage. Prospective customers are promised up to 100 "totally nude women" wearing nothing but heels. Customers are also picked up at the airport and taken to the clubs in a BMW 5 Series.

Flat-Rate Horror

In addition to so-called nudist or sauna clubs, where the male customers wear a towel while the women are naked, large brothels have also become established. They advertise their services at all-inclusive rates. When the Pussy Club opened near Stuttgart in 2009, the management advertised the club as follows: "Sex with all women as long as you want, as often as you want and the way you want. Sex. Anal sex. Oral sex without a condom. Three-ways. Group sex. Gang bangs." The price: €70 during the day and €100 in the evening.

According to the police, about 1,700 customers took advantage of the offer on the opening weekend. Buses arrived from far away and local newspapers reported that up to 700 men stood in line outside the brothel. Afterwards, customers wrote in Internet chat rooms about the supposedly unsatisfactory service, complaining that the women were no longer as fit for use after a few hours.

The business has become tougher, says Nuremberg social worker Andrea Weppert, who has worked with prostitutes for more than 20 years, during which the total number of prostitutes has tripled. According to Weppert, more than half of the women have no permanent residence, but instead travel from place to place, so that they can earn more money by being new to a particular city.

Today "a high percentage of prostitutes don't go home after work, but rather remain at their place of work around the clock," a former prostitute using the pseudonym Doris Winter wrote in a contribution to the academic series "The Prostitution Law." "The women usually live in the rooms where they work," she added.

In Nuremberg, such rooms cost between €50 and €80 a day, says social worker Weppert, and the price can go up to €160 in brothels with a lot of customers. Working conditions for prostitutes have "worsened in recent years," says Weppert. In Germany on the whole, she adds, "significantly more services are provided under riskier conditions and for less money than 10 years ago."

Dropping Prices

Despite the worsening conditions, women are flocking to Germany, the largest prostitution market in the European Union -- a fact that even brothel owners confirm. Holger Rettig of the UEGD says that the influx of women from Romania and Bulgaria has increased dramatically since the two countries joined the EU. "This has led to a drop in prices," says Rettig, who notes that the prostitution business is characterized by "a radical market economy rather than a social market economy."

Munich Police Chief Wilhelm Schmidbauer deplores the "explosive increase in human trafficking from Romania and Bulgaria," but adds that he lacks access to the necessary tools to investigate. He is often prohibited from using telephone surveillance. The result, says

Schmidbauer, "is that we have practically no cases involving human trafficking. We can't prove anything."

This makes it difficult to track down those who bring fresh product from the most remote corners of Europe for Germany's brothels, product like Sina. She told the psychologists in the office of the women's information center in Stuttgart about her path to German flat-rate brothels. In Corhana, her native village near Romania's border with the Republic of Moldova, most houses have no running water. Sina and the other village girls used to fetch water from the well every day. It was like a scene out of "Cinderella." All the girls dreamed that a man would come one day to rescue them from their gloomy lives.

The man, who eventually drove up to the village well in his big BMW, was named Marian. For Sina it was love at first sight. He told her that there was work in Germany, and her parents signed a form allowing her, as a minor, to leave the country. On the trip to Schifferstadt in the southwestern state of Rhineland-Palatinate, he gave Sina alcohol and slept with her.

Marian delivered her to the "No Limit," a flat-rate brothel. Sina was only 16, and she allegedly served up to 30 customers a day. She was occasionally paid a few hundred euros. Marian, worried about police raids, eventually sent her back to Romania. But she returned and continued to work as a prostitute. She hoped that a customer would fall in love with her and rescue her.

'No Measurable Improvements'

Has Germany's prostitution law improved the situation of women like Sina? Five years after it was introduced, the Family Ministry evaluated what the new legislation had achieved. The report states that the objectives were "only partially achieved," and that deregulation had "not brought about any measurable actual improvement in the social coverage of prostitutes." Neither working conditions nor the ability to exit the profession had improved. Finally, there was "no solid proof to date" that the law had reduced crime.

Hardly a single court had heard a case involving a prostitute suing for her wages. Only 1 percent of the women surveyed said that they had signed an employment contract as a prostitute. The fact that the Ver.di union had developed a "sample employment contract in the

field of sexual services" didn't change matters. In a poll conducted by Ver.di, a brothel operator said that she valued the prostitution law because it reduced the likelihood of raids. In fact, she said, the law was more advantageous for brothel operators than prostitutes.

To operate a mobile snack bar in Germany, one has to be in compliance with the DIN 10500/1 standard for "Vending Vehicles for Perishable Food," which states, for example, that soap dispensers and disposable towels are required. A brothel operator is not subject to any such restrictions. All he or she has to do is report to authorities when the brothel is opened.

Prostitutes still avoid registering with authorities. In Hamburg, with its famous Reeperbahn red-light district, only 153 women are in compliance with regulations and have registered with the city's tax office. The government wants prostitutes to pay taxes. Does it have to establish rules for the profession in return?

The odd role the government assumes in the sex trade is in evidence among street hookers in Bonn. Every evening, prostitutes have to buy a tax ticket from a machine, valid until 6 a.m. the next day. The ticket costs €6.

A Big Mac for Sex

In the northern part of Cologne, where drug-addicted prostitutes work along Geestemünder Strasse not far from the Ford plant, no taxes are levied. As part of a social project, so-called "working stalls" -- essentially walled off parking spots for car sex -- are built into a space under a shed roof. Although there are no signs plainly indicating that the facility is for prostitution, a speed limit of 10 kilometers per hour is posted for the fenced area, and drivers are required to move in a counter-clockwise direction.

On a cold spring evening, about 20 women are standing along the edge of the area. Some have brought along camping chairs while others are sitting in repurposed bus shelters. When a john has agreed on a price with one of the women, he takes her to one of the stalls. There are eight of the stalls under the shed roof, as well as a separate room for cyclists and pedestrians, with a concrete floor and a park bench. There is an alarm button in each stall, and a Catholic women's social service group monitors the area every evening.

Alia, a 23-year-old in a blonde wig, has squeezed herself into a corsage and she is trying to cover up the alcohol on her breath with a mint. Referring to herself and the other street prostitutes, Alia says: "People who work here have a real problem."

Alia's path to Geestemünder Strasse began when she dropped out of school and moved in with a boyfriend, who sent her out to turn tricks. She began working as a prostitute because of "financial difficulties and love," she says, and soon marijuana, cocaine, amphetamines and alcohol came into the mix. "There is no prostitution without coercion and distress," she says. She has been walking the streets for three years. "A woman who is doing well doesn't work like this," she says.

The going rate for oral sex and intercourse used to be €40 on Geestemünder Strasse. But when the nearby city of Dortmund closed its streetwalking area, more women came to Cologne, says Alia. "There are more and more women now, and they drop their prices so that they'll make something at all," she complains. Bulgarian and Romanian women sometimes charge less than €10, she says. "One woman here will even do it for a Big Mac."

Germany's Human Trafficking Problem

But women from Eastern Europe hardly work on Geestemünder Strasse. They have been driven away by regular police passport checks, which were in fact intended to find and protect victims of human trafficking and forced prostitution. Now the girls work the street in the southern part of Cologne, but this still brings down prices in the northern neighborhood.

In 2007 Carolyn Maloney, a Democratic Congresswoman from New York and founder of the Human Trafficking Caucus in the United States Congress, wrote about the consequences of the legalization of prostitution in and around the gambling mecca of Las Vegas. "Once upon a time," she wrote, "there was the naive belief that legalized prostitution would improve life for prostitutes, eliminate prostitution in areas where it remained illegal and remove organized crime from the business. Like all fairy tales, this turns out to be sheer fantasy."

German law enforcement officers working in red-light districts complain that they are hardly able to gain access to brothels anymore. Germany has become a "center for the sexual exploitation of young women from Eastern Europe, as well as a sphere of activity for organized crime groups from around the world," says Manfred Paulus, a retired chief

detective from the southern city of Ulm. He used to work as a vice detective and now warns women in Bulgaria and Belarus against being lured to Germany.

Statistically speaking, Germany has almost no problem with prostitution and human trafficking. According to the Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA), there were 636 reported cases of "human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation" in 2011, or almost a third less than 10 years earlier. Thirteen of the victims were under 14, and another 77 were under 18.

There are many women from EU countries "whose situation suggests they are the victims of human trafficking, but it is difficult to provide proof that would hold up in court," reads the BKA report. Everything depends on the women's testimony, the authors write, but there is "little willingness to cooperate with the police and assistance agencies, especially in the case of presumed victims from Romania and Bulgaria." And when women do dare to say something, their statements are "often withdrawn."

Declining Convictions

A study by the Max Planck Institute for Foreign and International Criminal Law concluded that official figures on human trafficking say "little about the actual scope of the offence."

According to a report on human trafficking recently presented by European Commissioner for Home Affairs Cecilia Malmström, there are more than 23,600 victims in the EU, and two-thirds of them are exploited sexually. Malmström, from Sweden, sees indications that criminal gangs are expanding their operations. Nevertheless, she says, the number of convictions is declining, because police are overwhelmed in their efforts to combat trafficking. She urges Germany to do more about the problem.

But what if the German prostitution law actually helps human traffickers? Has the law in fact fostered prostitution and, along with it, human trafficking?

Axel Dreher, a professor of international and development politics at the University of Heidelberg, has attempted to answer these questions, using data from 150 countries. The numbers were imprecise, as are all statistics relating to trafficking and prostitution, but he was able to identify a trend: Where prostitution is legal, there is more human trafficking than elsewhere. Most women who come to Germany to become prostitutes are not kidnapped on

the street -- and most do not seriously believe that they'll be working in a German bakery. More commonly, they are women like Sina, who fall in love with a man and follow him to Germany, or like Alina, who know that they are going to become prostitutes. But they often don't know how bad it can get -- and they are unaware that they will hardly be able to keep any of the money they earn.

Some cases are even more disturbing. In December, German TV audiences were shocked by the show "Wegwerfmädchen" ("Disposable Girls"), part of the "Tatort" crime series, filmed in the northern German city of Hanover. It depicts pimps throwing two severely injured young women into the trash after a sex orgy. Just a few days after the episode aired, Munich police found a whimpering, scantily clad girl in a small park.

The Isar Dungeon

The 18-year-old Romanian had fled from a brothel. She told the officers that three men and two women had approached her on the street in her native village. The strangers had promised her a job as a nanny. When they arrived in Munich, she said, they blindfolded her and took her to a basement cell with a door that could only be opened with a security code.

Another girl was sitting on a bunk bed in the dark room, she said, and there was the sound of running water behind the walls. The police assume that the hiding place was in an empty factory near the Isar River, which flows through Munich. The men raped her and, when she refused to work in a brothel, they beat her, she said.

The officers were dubious at first, but the girl had remembered the pimps' names. They were arrested and are now in custody. Because they refuse to answer questions, the eerie dungeon still hasn't been found and the Romanian woman is now in the witness protection program.

Sometimes girls are sent by their own families, like Cora from Moldova. The 20-year-old digs her hands into the pockets of her hoodie, and she is wearing plush slippers with big eyes sewn to them. Cora lives in a hostel run by a Romanian assistance center for victims of human traffickers. When girls in Moldova are 15 or 16, says Cora's psychologist, their brothers and fathers often say to them: "Whore, go out and make some money."

Cora's brothers took their attractive and well-behaved sister to a disco in the nearest city. Her only duty there was to serve drinks, but she met a man there with contacts in Romania. "He said that I could make a lot more money in the discos there." Cora went with him, first to Romania and then to Germany.

'Process of Emancipation'

After being raped for an entire day in Nuremberg, she says, she knew what she had to do. She worked in a brothel on Frauentormauer, one of Germany's oldest red-light districts. She received the men in her room, allegedly for up to 18 hours a day. She says that police officers also came to the brothel -- as customers. "They didn't notice anything. Or else they didn't care."

The brothel was very busy on Christmas Eve 2012. Cora says that her pimp demanded that she work a 24-hour shift, and that he stabbed her in the face with a knife when she refused. The wound was bleeding so profusely that she was allowed to go to the hospital. A customer whose mobile phone number she knew helped her flee to Romania, where Cora filed charges against her tormentor. The pimp called her recently, she says, and threatened to track her down.

Despite stories like these, politicians in Berlin feel no significant pressure to do anything. This is partly because, in the debate over prostitution, an ideologically correct position carries more weight than the deplorable realities. For example, when the Hamburg University of Applied Sciences held a conference on prostitution in Germany a year ago, an attendee said that prostitution, "as a recognized sex trade, is undergoing a process of emancipation and professionalization."

Such statements are shocking to Rahel Gugel, a law professor. "That's absurd. It has nothing to do with reality," she says. A professor of law in social work at the Baden-Württemberg Cooperative State University, Gugel wrote her dissertation on prostitution law and has worked for an aid organization.

Proponents of legalization argue that everyone has the right to engage in whatever profession he or she chooses. Some feminists even praise prostitutes for their emancipation, because, they say, women should be able to do what they want with their bodies. In practice, however,

it becomes clear how blurred the boundaries are between voluntary and forced prostitution. Did women like Alina and Cora become prostitutes voluntarily, and did they make autonomous decisions? "It is politically correct in Germany to respect the decisions of individual women," says lawyer Gugel. "But if you want to protect women, this isn't the way to do it."

Berlin's Erroneous Approach

According to Gugel, many women are in emotional or economic predicaments. There is evidence that a higher-than-average number of prostitutes were abused or neglected as children. Surveys have shown that many can be considered traumatized. Prostitutes suffer from depression, anxiety disorders and addiction at a much higher rate than the general population. Most prostitutes have been raped, many of them repeatedly. In surveys, most women say that they would get out of prostitution immediately if they could.

Of course, there are also those women who decide that they would rather sell their bodies than stock supermarket shelves. But there is every indication that they are a minority, albeit one that is vocally represented by a few female brothel owners and prostitution lobbyists like Felicitas Schirow.

German law takes a fundamentally erroneous approach, says law professor Gugel. To protect women, she explains, prostitution needs to be limited and the customers punished. Hers is a lone voice in Germany.

But not elsewhere in Europe. Some countries that once pursued a path similar to Germany's are turning away and following the example set by the Swedes. Two years before Germany passed its prostitution law, the Swedes took the opposite approach. Activist Kajsa Ekis Ekman is fighting to convince the rest of Europe to emulate her country. Since publishing a book in which she described the lives of prostitutes, Ekman has been traveling from one European city to the next, as a sort of ambassador in the fight against human trafficking.

In mid-April, Ekman's campaign took her to KOFRA, a women's center in Munich. Ekman is blond, blue-eyed, petite and energetic. She sits on a narrow wooden chair and is so intent on talking that the cup of coffee in front of her gets cold -- as if there weren't enough time for all the arguments that are now important to make.

As a student in Barcelona, Ekman shared an apartment with a woman who worked as a prostitute. She witnessed how pimps dominate their employees. "I've been involved ever since I experienced how my roommate was selling her body," she says. Back in Sweden, she was astonished by a public debate over free love and the self-determination of prostitutes. "What I had seen was different," says Ekman.

Punishing the Clients, Not the Prostitutes

In 1999, when Sweden made it illegal to buy sexual services, its European neighbors could hardly believe it. For the first time, it was the customers and not the prostitutes who were being punished.

"Prostitution now flourishes in obscurity," wrote the influential German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, saying that it was a "defeat for the women's movement in Sweden," and speculating that "dogmatic feminism" was at work. Can a society that wants to be free of prudery punish men who visit prostitutes? It can, says Ekman, citing the successes in her country, where fewer and fewer men are paying for sex and where those who do are more and more ashamed of it. "Before our law came into effect, one in eight men in Sweden had visited a prostitute," she says, and notes that that number has since declined to one in 12.

Of course, prostitution still exists in Sweden, but street prostitution has declined by half. The total number of prostitutes has dropped from an estimated 2,500 to about 1,000 to 1,500. Pimps bring women from Eastern Europe into the country in minivans and they often camp out on the outskirts of cities, but prostitution is no longer a big business. Critics counter that prostitution in apartments and via the Internet has increased, and some men are now going to brothels in the Baltic countries or Eastern Europe instead.

The Swedish law isn't based on the prostitute's right to make autonomous decisions, but on the equal status of men and women, which is enshrined in both the Swedish and German constitutions. The argument, in greatly simplified terms, is that prostitution is exploitation, and that there is always an imbalance in power. The fact that men can buy women for sex, the Swedes argue, cements a perception of women that is detrimental to equal rights and all women.

'Pimp My Bordello'

Sweden punishes the customers, pimps and human traffickers, not the prostitutes. This approach is intended to stifle demand for sex for money and make the business unprofitable for traffickers and exploiters. Two years ago, the Swedes increased the maximum penalty for johns from six to 12 months in prison.

Although the police are not always especially assiduous about pursuing punters, they have arrested more than 3,700 men since 1999. In most cases, the men were only forced to pay fines. There are also debates in Sweden over whether the restrictive law is the right approach, but it enjoys considerable support among the population. Ten years after the law was enacted, more than 70 percent of Swedes said they supported punishing the men who pay for sex instead of the prostitutes they pay.

In Germany, on the other hand, the situation is such that the RTL II television channel broadcasts a show in which a "Pimp my bordello" team drives around the country to visit "German brothels in trouble" and boost the sex business with good advice. It is efforts like this that prompted Alice Schwarzer, publisher of the feminist journal EMMA, to envision, "as a near-term goal" for Germany, "a social debate that culminates in the condemnation of prostitution instead of, as is the case today, its acceptance and even promotion."

Pierrette Pape believes that there are consequences to the way prostitution is viewed in various countries. "Nowadays, a little boy in Sweden grows up with the fact that buying sex is a crime. A little boy in the Netherlands grows up with the knowledge that women sit in display windows and can be ordered like mass-produced goods." Pape is the spokeswoman of the European Women's Lobby in Brussels, an umbrella group for 2,000 European women's organizations.

Pape finds it "surprising" that Germany is not seriously reviewing its policies related to human trafficking. "The debate has begun throughout Europe, and we hope that German politicians and aid organizations will pay more attention to human rights in the future than they have until now."

Several European countries now follow the Swedish model. In Iceland, which has adopted similar legislation, politicians are even considering a ban on online pornography. Since 2009, Norway has also punished the customers of prostitutes. In Barcelona, it is illegal to employ the services of a street prostitute.

The French Approach

Under a Finnish law enacted in 2006, men can be punished if they were customers of a prostitute who works for a pimp or is a victim of human trafficking. But it has proved to be impossible to prove that the men knew that this was the case. The Finnish Justice Ministry is now preparing a report on whether Finland should adopt the Swedish model.

Many in France also want to emulate Sweden. Shortly before taking office, the minister responsible for women's rights, Najat Vallaud-Belkacem, made a bold announcement. "My goal is to see prostitution disappear," she said. Politicians and sociologists derided the idea as "utopian," and prostitutes protested in the streets of Lyon and Paris. Vallaud-Belkacem's draft law calls for up to six months in prison and a €3,000 fine for clients. But it will probably take some time before she can prevail within the government.

And in Germany? Politicians in Berlin argue over minimal changes to the prostitution law and then end up doing nothing. In 2007, then-Family Minister Ursula von der Leyen, a member of Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU), wanted to make brothels subject to government approval, and fellow CDU member Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, who was interior minister of the state of Saarland at the time (and who is now governor of the state), supported her. But the two politicians failed to secure a majority within their party and nothing happened.

In 2008, the Conference of Equality and Women's Ministers tried to introduce a rule that would make brothel operators subject to a reliability test. They consulted with their colleagues in the Conference of Interior Ministers, but nothing happened.

Standing Pat

In 2009, female politicians from the CDU, the SPD, the business-friendly Free Democratic Party (FDP) and the Green Party in the southwestern state of Baden-Württemberg called for an initiative in the Bundesrat, the legislative body that represents the German states, against "inhuman flat-rate services." But no changes were made to the law.

The Netherlands chose the path of legal deregulation two years before Germany. Both the Dutch justice minister and the police concede that there have been no palpable improvements for prostitutes since then. They are generally in poorer health than before, and increasing numbers are addicted to drugs. The police estimate that 50 to 90 percent of prostitutes do not practice the profession voluntarily.

Social Democrat Lodewijk Asscher believes that the legalization of prostitution was "a national mistake." The Dutch government now plans to tighten the law to combat a rise in human trafficking and forced prostitution.

The Germans aren't there yet. The Greens, who played such an instrumental role by supporting the prostitution law 12 years ago, have no regrets. A spokesperson for Kerstin Müller, the Green Party parliamentary floor leader at the time, says that she focuses on other issues today. Irmingard Schewe-Gerigk, who was also a leading Green Party parliamentarian at the time the law was passed, says: "The law was good. It's just that we should have implemented it more thoroughly." Interestingly enough, Schewe-Gerigk is now the chairman of the women's rights organization Terre des Femmes, which aims to achieve "a society without prostitution."

The third pioneer of the new law at the time, Volker Beck, also continues to support it today. Beck, his party's former legal policy spokesman, does call for new assistance programs and exit programs. But he says that Sweden cannot be a model for Germany. "A ban doesn't improve anything, because then it will just happen in places that are difficult to monitor," Beck says. Besides, he adds, "criminal gangs will take over the business" -- as if upstanding businesspeople were the ones running it today.

'Realm of Illegality'

A few of his fellow Greens disagree. "A large segment of the industry is already operating in the realm of illegality today," says Thekla Walker from Stuttgart. The chair of her party's state organization, Walker has sought to change her party's approach to prostitution.

"The autonomous prostitute we envisioned when the prostitution law was enacted in 2001, who negotiates on equal terms with her client and can support herself with her income, is the exception," reads a motion Walker introduced during a party convention last month. The current laws, it continues, do not protect women from exploitation, but grants them "merely the freedom to allow themselves to be exploited." The Greens, Walker wrote, cannot turn a blind eye to the "catastrophic living and working conditions of many prostitutes."

But they did. Walker withdrew the motion because it stood no chance of securing a majority, though the party has said it would take a closer look to see if the law requires improvements.

In Germany, those who speak out against legalization are considered "prudish and moralizing," says law professor Gugel. Besides, she adds, she doesn't have the feeling "that politicians have much interest in the subject."

Family Minister Kristina Schröder, though, did in fact set out to crack down on human trafficking and forced prostitution. "Despite very intensive efforts, it hasn't been possible to achieve unanimity among the four ministries involved," Schröder's ministry said in a statement. Her desire to regulate brothels more heavily failed in the face of opposition by Justice Minister Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger. Schnarrenberger believes that reforming the law is unnecessary and repeats the old argument, namely that the German law brings women out of illegality while the Swedish law forces them into the dark.

Given such disagreement, it would be a miracle if the government reached a decision soon to protect victims of human trafficking more effectively. Instead, women will continue to have to fend for themselves.

Completely Legal

Alina from Sânanndrei managed to flee from the Airport Muschis brothel. After a raid, she and 10 other women ran to a Turkish restaurant in the neighborhood. The owner's brother, who was a customer, hid the women and rented a bus at his own expense. Then he tried to drive them to Romania. The pimps tried to stop the bus, but the women were able to escape.

Alina now lives in her parent's house again. She hasn't told them about what happened. She is working, but she doesn't want to say what she does. The pay, she says, is enough for her bus ticket, clothes and a little makeup.

Alina sometimes visits the AIDrom, a counseling center for victims of human trafficking in the western Romanian city of Timisoara, where she speaks with psychologist Georgiana Palcu, who is trying to find her a training position as a hairdresser or a cook. Palcu says that the conversations with young women who have returned from Germany are "endless and difficult." She encourages them to be optimistic.

But Palcu has no illusions. Even if a girl could find a training position, she probably wouldn't take the job, because such positions offer no more than €200 for a 40-hour workweek. As a result, says Palcu, many of those who returned from Germany after being mistreated there are working as prostitutes again. "What can I tell them?" she asks. "This is reality. You can't live on €200."

The Airport Muschis brothel in Schönefeld no longer exists. It's been replaced by Club Erotica, which does not offer flat-rates. But johns still have plenty of choice in the area. A few kilometers away in Schöneberg, the King George has switched to flat-rate pricing. Its management uses the slogan "Geiz macht Geil," which loosely translates as "being cheap makes you horny." For €99, clients can enjoy sex and drinks until the establishment closes. Anal sex, unprotected oral sex and kissing-with-tongue are extra. The King George offers a "gang-bang party" on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

It's completely legal.

BY CORDULA MEYER, CONNY NEUMANN, FIDELIUS SCHMID, PETRA TRUCKENDANNER and STEFFEN WINTER

Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan

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4. Brothel Crackdown: Politicians Aim to Reform Prostitution Laws (04/22/2013)
<http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/german-coalition-backs-tougher-prostitution-laws-to-curb-trafficking-a-895748.html>
5. 'Sex & Relax': Job Center Apologizes for Offer in Bordello (02/07/2013)
<http://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/outrage-after-job-center-suggests-brothel-job-for-young-woman-in-germany-a-882021.html>

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